WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade, comprising in combination:

(a) an elongated handle having a first side and a second side, a first elongated cavity within said handle extending over the long dimension thereof and opening to the outside at both a forward end and a rearward end, and a tab extending into the first cavity perpendicular to the long dimension thereof and located toward the rearward end of said handle, the first side having an elongated window therethrough along the long dimension of said handle and located toward the forward end thereof and a second window therethrough disposed toward the rearward end of said handle, the first side further having a first tab extending into the first cavity and located in the vicinity of the edge of the elongated window closest to the rearward end of said handle and a second tab extending into the first cavity between the second window and the rearward end of said handle; the second side having an interior elongated slot therein which terminates before reaching the forward end of said handle and which opens to the outside of said handle at the rearward end thereof;

(b) a cutting blade;

(c) an elongated slide having a first end and a second end adapted to slidably move longitudinally through the first cavity in said handle and to receive said cutting blade in the region of the first end thereof; a portion adapted to be engaged by and actuated by a digit through the elongated window; a raised, deformable latch in the region of the second end on the side thereof of the digit-engaging portion for engaging either of the first or second tabs in said handle; and a tab adapted to move within the slot in the second side of said handle, said slide engaging and being reversibly immobilized by the tab extending

into the first cavity of said handle when located in its rearwardmost position in said handle; and

(d) a coil spring disposed within the interior slot in the second side of said handle and adapted to continuously contact the tab of said slide, thereby providing a force on said slide directed toward the rearward end of said handle.

2. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 1, wherein the first side further has at least one third window therethrough between the second window and the rearward end of said handle and at least one third tab extending into the first cavity and disposed between the at least one third window and the rearward end of said handle, such that the deformable latch portion of said slide can engage the at least one third tab in said handle, whereby said handle can receive a longer slide.

3. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 1, further comprising means for reducing contact between said slide and the first side and the second side of said handle when said slide is moved through said handle.

4. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 3, wherein said means for reducing contact between said slide and the first side and the second side of said handle includes a second cavity coextensive with the first cavity and disposed on a side of the first cavity perpendicular to the long dimension thereof and adapted to receive a portion of said slide and guide said slide within the first cavity when said slide is moved therethrough.

5. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 1, wherein said cutting blade can be replaced on said slide.

6. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 1, wherein the thickness of the first side in the region of the elongated window is chosen such that a user of said surgical scalpel

cannot accidentally depress the raised, deformable latch member of said slide through the elongated window when said cutting blade is in its extended and locked position.

7. A surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade, comprising in combination:

(a) an elongated handle having a first side having a first interior recessed surface and a second side having a second interior recessed surface, the first interior surface and the second interior surface together forming an elongated cavity within said handle extending over the long dimension thereof and opening to the outside at both a forward end and a rearward end of said handle member, the first side further having a first window, a second window and at least one third window therethrough disposed along the first side, the first window being elongated along the long dimension of said handle and being closest to the forward end thereof and the at least one third window being closest to the rearward end of said handle, and a tab which extends into the cavity, the second side having an interior elongated slot therein which terminates before reaching the forward end of said handle and which opens at the rearward end thereof, the second side further comprising a first tab extending into the cavity between the first window and the second window, a second tab extending into the cavity between the second window and the third window, and at least one third tab extending into the cavity between the at least one third window and the rearward end of said handle;

(b) a cutting blade;

(c) an elongated slide having a first end and a second end and adapted to slidably move longitudinally through the cavity in said handle and to receive said cutting blade in the region of the first end thereof, having a portion adapted to be engaged by and actuated by a digit through the first window, having a raised, deformable latch in the region of the second end on the side thereof of the digit-engaging portion for

engaging any of the first, second or third tabs in said handle, and having a tab adapted to move within the slot in the second side of said handle; and

(d) a coil spring located within the interior slot in the second side of said handle and adapted to continuously contact the tab of said slide, thereby providing a force on said slide directed toward the rearward end of said handle.

8. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 7, further comprising a tab extending into the first cavity of said handle perpendicular to the long dimension thereof and located toward the rearward end of said handle, said slide engaging and being reversibly immobilized by the tab when said slide is located in its rearwardmost position in said handle.

9. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 7, further comprising means for reducing contact between said slide and the first side and the second side of said handle when said slide is moved through said handle.

10. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 9 wherein said means for reducing contact between said slide and the first side and the second side of said handle includes a second cavity coextensive with the first cavity and disposed on a side of the first cavity perpendicular to the long dimension thereof and adapted to receive a portion of said slide and guide said slide within the first cavity when said slide is moved therethrough.

11. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 7, wherein said cutting blade can be replaced on said slide.

12. A surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade, comprising in combination:

(a) an elongated handle having a first side and a second side, a first elongated cavity within said handle extending over the long

dimension thereof and opening to the outside at both a forward end and a rearward end, the first side having an elongated window therethrough along the long dimension of said handle and located toward the forward end thereof and a second window therethrough disposed toward the rearward end of said handle, the first side further having a first tab extending into the first cavity and located in the vicinity of the edge of the elongated window closest to the rearward end of said handle and a second tab extending into the first cavity between the second window and the rearward end of said handle; the second side having an interior elongated slot therein which terminates before reaching the forward end of said handle and which opens to the outside of said handle at the rearward end thereof;

(b) a cutting blade;

(c) an elongated slide having a first end and a second end adapted to slidably move longitudinally through the first cavity in said handle and to receive said cutting blade in the region of the first end thereof; a portion adapted to be engaged by and actuated by a digit through the elongated window; a raised, deformable latch in the region of the second end on the side thereof of the digit-engaging portion for engaging either of the first or second tabs in said handle; and a tab adapted to move within the slot in the second side of said handle;

(d) means for engaging and reversibly immobilizing said slide when said slide is located in its rearwardmost position in said handle; and

(e) means for providing a force on said slide directed toward the rearward end of said handle.

13. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 12 wherein said means for providing a force on said slide directed toward the rearward end of said handle comprises a coil spring disposed within the interior slot in the second side of said handle and adapted to continuously contact the tab of said slide.

14. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 12, wherein said means for engaging and reversibly immobilizing said slide when said slide is located in its rearwardmost position in said handle includes a tab extending into the first cavity perpendicular to the long dimension thereof and located toward the rearward end of said handle such that said slide engages and is reversibly immobilized by the tab when said slide is located in its rearwardmost position in said handle.

15. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 12 wherein the first side further has at least one third window therethrough between the second window and the rearward end of said handle and at least one third tab extending into the first cavity and disposed between the at least one third window and the rearward end of said handle, such that the deformable latch portion of said slide can engage the at least one third tab in said handle, whereby said handle can receive a longer slide.

16. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 12 further comprising means for reducing contact between said slide and the first side and the second side of said handle when said slide is moved through said handle.

17. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 16 wherein said means for reducing contact between said slide and the first side and the second side of said handle includes a second cavity coextensive with the first cavity and disposed on a side of the first cavity perpendicular to the long dimension thereof and adapted to receive a portion of said slide and guide said slide within the first cavity when said slide is moved therethrough.

18. The surgical scalpel having a spring-actuated retractable blade as described in claim 12 wherein said cutting blade can be replaced on said slide.